



THE Q+A

# Tania León


The composer reflects on her mold-breaking journey.

BY  
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**TANIA LEÓN IS BUSIER THAN** ever. A presence on the American music scene for over 50 years, she has always “done things her own way,” as she tells *Overtones*. In 2021, the Cuban-born composer was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Music for her *Stride*, a work commissioned by the New York Philharmonic for its Project 19 initiative, marking the centennial of the Nineteenth Amendment. Months after receiving the prize, Ms. León, 79, became the composer in residence at Curtis





for the 2021–22 season. She tells us about the role, the Pulitzer win, and industry-wide efforts to make classical music more inclusive.

**Nick:** We are so excited to welcome you to Curtis this year. What sort of guidance have you sought to impart to our students?

**Tania:** Well, let me say this: I am of the mindset that when we choose what we want to do, and we deposit so much effort—hours, insecurities, moments of triumph and failure—it’s because whatever we are putting our attention to is what is very prevalent inside of us. When a student walks into a conservatory or any institution where he or she wants to learn the art of putting sounds together, whether it’s an interpretation or creating a new chapter out of twelve notes, I think the only thing we can do is help them to bring it out.

**Nick:** What did the Pulitzer Prize win mean to you?

**Tania:** It was a total surprise because I’ve never been a chaser of awards. I had no idea I had been nominated. I had no idea who put this together. And all of a sudden, I found out because of a call from Frank Oteri [New Music USA’s Composer Advocate]. I was not on the Internet, and I had my phone off because I was at the dentist. I was totally nonchalant, and I couldn’t believe my ears. Frank had to tell me about three times. And then, of course, I got emotional and started thinking about my grandmother, who was the one who started this whole thing about music in my family.

**Nick:** How so?

**Tania:** She saw me acting very strangely when I was four years old. She said that every time I flipped on the radio and there was something with movement, I would start dancing with the rhythms that I was hearing. And she said, “Well, I better get

us aware; we have to find out what this is!” All of that came to my mind at that point.

**Nick:** I know that *Stride*, your Pulitzer Prize-winning piece, was inspired in part by your grandmother and the work of Susan B. Anthony. What was your process like when you were composing in response to these ideas?

**Tania:** *Stride* for me was a revelation. I did not know so much about the suffragist movement or Susan B. Anthony. [New York Philharmonic president and CEO] Deborah Borda told me, “We are doing such and such, and we are interested in you writing one of the opening pieces.” And that is when I went to YouTube to find out about Susan B. Anthony. I even heard her voice, her manifestos, I virtually visited her home, and I started reading all about that era. So, I had to research and figure out when the women in Cuba were allowed to vote, and therefore the rest of the world. It was something that became bigger than the celebration of Susan B. Anthony and the hundred-year celebration. No, it transcended to women over the centuries.

**Nick:** What spoke to you about the fight for change in that era?

**Tania:** When I arrived in the United States, one of the first things that I saw on television were the marches with Martin Luther King Jr. I didn’t speak English, but I was watching the body language. And there’s a moment in *Stride* where, suddenly, I create a march inside of the piece [to suggest] all these women walking together. And you cannot predict it because I made sure that people could not count, “one, two, three, four,” or “one and two and.” No. Nuh-uh. You never know [where the beat is]. I did all kinds of things using sixteenth notes and displacing them. To give the sensation of shoes on pavement, I accompany

that with a sand block.

**Nick:** How do you regard the current efforts to better champion composers from underrepresented groups, and what do you hope will change going forward?

**Tania:** Well, I’m glad that I am still alive while this restructuring is going on. This is something that has been part of my mantra.

But we all created this situation. We’re trying to correct it in a hurry now, right? I’m very happy about the fact that the opportunities are coming more and more, for all involved. But unfortunately, we have lost incredible talents—Wendell Logan and George Walker, for example. These people were the equivalent of, say, Charles Wuorinen, but all of them had a different voice, a different way of expressing themselves. And now, everybody’s asking, “Where are those pieces? We need to play those pieces.” In other words, I would like to actually make sure that this is genuine. And that this is going to continue.

*This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*

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